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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Unravelling conceptualizations of (in)equality in early childhood education and care system

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### ABSTRACT

Early childhood education's role in increasing equality in society has been highlighted by international organizations. However, it is unclear what is meant by the concept of equality in different situations, as the meaning fluctuates and reflects the cultural political contexts in which it is embedded. In this paper, we analyse the equality discourses of local early childhood education and care (ECEC) policymakers in Finland, drawing on different conceptualizations of equality and social justice. In doing so, we show that the way in which equality is conceptualized differs – along with the suggested remedies – depending on whether the subjects of equality are adults, children at the border of an institutional setting, or children within the ECEC institution.

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Equality; equity; social justice; early childhood education; child care

### Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has become a core interest of policymakers in many countries in the Global North. In addition to being an investment in a knowledge-based economy and a means of ensuring economic growth and national competitiveness, ECEC services are considered a key player in reducing inequality (e.g. UNICEF, 2000; World Bank, 1995). A reduction of inequalities have said to include, for example, breaking the cycle of transgenerational poverty (UNICEF, 2000), reducing the need for special education, increasing the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lowering the crime rate and decreasing overall social costs (Heckman, 2011). At the same time, increasing interconnectedness across nation-states in terms of the flow of capital has led to an increase in the discourse of investing in human capital, meaning, educating profitable workers to strengthen national economies. However, the discourse about the need to limit the role of the state has, to some extent, led to a race to the bottom in the form of minimizing regulations, social security and public services (see Mahon, 2010; Morel, Palier and Palme, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that issues related to equality and equity have been on the ECEC agenda lately.

In addition, (in)equality in ECEC has been subject to increased interest in the academic debate over the past decade. The body of ECEC research on (in)equality has mainly considered (in)equality from the viewpoint of balancing work and family life, and the availability of and access to services, and from the viewpoint of children's development and learning environments (Mary,

Hautala, Alasuutari, Repo, & Karila, 2018). Yet, also post-colonial and post-structural feminist perspectives have been utilized for examining a hierarchy of differences within ECEC – the ways in which oppressive power relations operate in ECEC practices (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2005).

As noted in earlier studies, equality is a term that is sometimes used loosely and vaguely as an aim of ECEC so that all stakeholders are willing to accept it (see Lazenby, 2016). However, the matter of what exactly is being talked about when discussing equality in the context of ECEC has rarely been raised. Moreover, there is even sparser information concerning how these issues are conceptualized within local-level policies even though in many countries, as Finland, local actors have a great deal of autonomy in designing the ECEC system.

This paper focuses on the conceptualizations of equality within the ECEC system. We aim to take part in the recent discussions concerning discourses of equality in education (Bøyum, 2013; Reay, 2012; Smith, 2013). Specifically, we aim to shed light on the how we can make differing conceptualizations of equality more visible and further unravel the differences by using the discourses of ECEC and childcare by Finnish policymakers as an example. In doing so, it becomes possible to continue to seek common ground for discussing the possible beneficial roles of educational systems and, more particularly, the ECEC system in tackling societal inequalities.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide contextual information about Finnish early childhood education. Second, we explicate the steps of our inquiry and summarize Westen's (1985),

Lazenby's (2016) and Fraser's (1997, 2008) accounts of the elements the concept of equality consists of that we have been inspired by when looking for an analytical tool that would help us unravel the multiplicity of conceptualizations of equality in early childhood education among local policymakers in Finland. Third, we illustrate the complexity related to conceptualizations of equality in ECEC by using illustrative examples from the Finnish ECEC policy debate. Finally, we discuss our findings.

### **Finnish ECEC as a context for examining conceptualizations of equality**

The Finnish case of ECEC provides us with a useful vantage point on examining conceptualizations of equality. Equality in childhood has usually been considered as an essential characteristic of the Nordic countries, and it is sometimes viewed as a goal that has been already achieved. In the PISA survey 2010 organized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Finland had the smallest performance variations between schools on achievement in the areas of reading, mathematics and science as compared to all of the participating nations (OECD, 2010). This has been considered as a sign of an educational system that fosters equality.

Historically, the Finnish education system has been developed assuming that Finland is rather homogenous society (Gordon & Holland, 2003). In this millennium, this continues to be the dominant view on Finnish ECEC (Lappalainen, 2006). However, issues of (in)equality related to ECEC have been discussed. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, gender equality – especially, the possibility of women to participate in working life – was on the agenda of Finnish social policy. This led to the establishment of public ECEC services, previously referred as day care. In the 1980s, equality was topicalized particularly regarding families who did not use ECEC services or those who did not have access to centre-based ECEC in the rural areas (Anttonen, Baldock, & Sipilä, 2003). As a solution to this issue, the law regarding home care allowance was enacted, as will be described later. Since the 1990s, heterogeneity in ECEC has been examined based mostly on linguistic and cultural differences between children and families (Jokikokko & Karikoski, 2016).

The heterogeneity in Finnish ECEC has increased especially after the 1990s (Arvola, Lastikka, & Reunamo, 2017). Yet, compared to other countries, for example, the number of people with immigrant background is still low in Finland. In 2016, their proportion was 6.6% of the whole population.<sup>1</sup> However, Finnish society has been to some extent ethnically and culturally heterogenous for centuries. Due to its common history with Sweden, Finland has

two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, with the Swedish-speaking population being the minority. Moreover, there is a small Sami population and Roma minority in Finland as well.

All ECEC institutions in Finland are expected to follow the national regulations and curriculum. Institutional ECEC encompasses integrated services for 0–6-year-olds and includes centre-based services as well as family day care. Municipalities have the responsibility to provide ECEC services for their inhabitants. Public preschool<sup>2</sup> is the most common institutional ECEC setting in Finland since 79% of the children attending ECEC are enrolled in public preschools. In total, about 63% of all 1–6-year-olds attend ECEC in Finland (THL, 2015).

Municipal ECEC is not the only choice available to Finnish parents after parental leave, however. As was mentioned earlier, Finnish parents are entitled to a child home care allowance. This enables them to take care of their children by themselves or to use other informal care options if their under-three-year-old child does not attend or utilize the publicly subsidized ECEC services (Kröger, Anttonen, & Sipilä, 2003; Repo, 2010). In addition, parents can be paid private day care allowance by the Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which enables them to purchase child care services from the market. Some municipalities also pay a municipal supplement on top of the private day care allowance and/or provide a voucher for use at private preschools or private family day care services. While such benefits offer alternatives to the use of the public services, they balance the costs of private services for the families that choose that option to a similar same level as the cost of public ECEC.

The mixture of care allowances in Finland reflects the key principle of the ECEC system, universalism, which refers to the idea that everyone should have access to good-quality services. This is considered one of the materializations of the Nordic ideals of equality (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1994; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Mahon, Anttonen, Bergqvist, Brennan, & Hobson, 2012). Universalism is associated with an egalitarian welfare state, the dissolution of the class system and the promotion of equality (Anttonen and Sipilä, 2012). In ECEC, universalism was manifested in the 1990s when the so-called 'subjective right to ECEC' was enforced. Since 1996, all children under school age are legally entitled to attend publicly subsidized ECEC regardless of their parents' labour market position or other familial factors.

In terms of the use of care rights Finnish parents employ, the position of ECEC has become quite interesting. Finland has introduced the strongest rights for public ECEC in all of the Nordic countries, but in Finland, small children are cared for longer and on a more full-time basis at home than in any of the other

Nordic countries (see Haataja, 2005; NOSOSCO, 2015). On a practical level, Finnish childcare policies and the opportunity structure involved in it have led to the relatively widespread popularity of home care for children (Sjöberg, 2004). As such, around half of the children under the age of three and third of 3–5-year-old children are cared for at home, mostly by their mothers (KELA, 2015). In comparison, for example, in Sweden, only a small per cent of children over 3 years are cared at home (NOSOSCO, 2015).

Moreover, access to services does not guarantee a reduction of inequality. For example, it is argued that teachers have a limited understanding of how to address the diversity. Consequently, people with different family, social and ethnic backgrounds and the hierarchies they are surrounded with are often not taken into account (Layne & Dervin, 2016).

Earlier examinations of the use of the concept of equality in ECEC in Finnish policy arenas have revealed – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – that the equality of children has not been at the centre of the policy deliberation. Historically, the rationales upon which Finnish ECEC policies are deliberated have been heavily focused on labour market needs. Equality- and equity-related issues have been present in ECEC policy deliberation mostly in regard to gender equality and women's opportunities to participate in the labour force (Paananen, 2017).

Recently, political debates concerning ECEC have provoked discussion concerning equality. One of the key issues has been the government's decision to limit entitlement to ECEC in order to balance the budget in 2016. Since 1996 until 2016, the amount of time that a child could attend ECEC was not regulated. In 2016, Parliament passed new legislation that allowed municipalities to limit ECEC entitlement to 20 h per week unless the child's parents worked or studied full time (EV 112/2015). In addition, full-time ECEC of over 20 h per week was guaranteed to those children who benefit from the ECEC due to developmental, social or other reasons. These parents were required to apply for full-time ECEC. The proposition of this law evoked much discussion in the media, and well-attended public demonstrations were held. The issue also provoked considerable deliberation among the city councils of some municipalities. In this paper, we will focus on some of these debates.

The conceptualization of equality reflects the political climate in which the policy statements have been created and, thus, varies and changes. Since the ECEC policy situation in Finland has been shifting recently, it provides us a useful vantage point to examine the potentially multi-fold meanings of equality. Thus, in this paper, we examine the ways in which Finnish policymakers construct the concepts of 'equality' and 'inequality' in their discussions concerning ECEC.

## Unravelling the concept of inequality

In this study, we are committed to the idea that language not only reflects the world but also reproduces and reconstructs it. Definitions of 'equality' and 'inequality' are based on values and beliefs about the good society and the nature of childhood, for example. However, it is also based on beliefs concerning the current state of affairs, so it is important to examine these conceptualizations in a more nuanced way. First, we will explore the concept of inequality from the viewpoint of its negation, equality.

In the context of education, Husén (1975) has divided the different conceptualizations of equality into three categories: equality as a beginning, equality as treatment and equality as a final goal. The conceptualization of equality as a beginning entails a presupposition that when entering an educational institution, children start on exactly the same footing. The idea of equality as treatment presupposes that everyone, irrespective of his or her social origin, should be treated equally. This idea of equality is usually embedded in legal institutions: everybody is equal under the law. Finally, equality can be regarded as a goal. In this view, educational policy should introduce measures that contribute to increased equalization in educational attainment, socio-economic status and participation in the decision-making processes (Husén, 1975).

Somewhat similarly, Hugh Lazenby has differentiated two ways of connecting education and equality. First, education may be a vehicle for the realization of equality of opportunities (Lazenby, 2016). For example, the conception of equality of opportunity entails that each individual should have the same means to live a good life, even though they may have differences in what they achieve that depend on their natural talent and their personal choices and level of effort they put into achieving their goals. In this conceptualization of equality, the educational system's role is to provide compensation for those individuals who have been in one way or another disadvantaged outside of the educational institutions. The second way of connecting equality and education does not view education solely as a vehicle; rather, it is defined as the equal access to the educational system and the equal distribution of resources within it (Lazenby, 2016). Lazenby calls this view 'equality of opportunity for education'.

These categorizations might not be sufficient when examining equality in the context of early childhood education and childcare, however. In this paper, we will show that a more nuanced conceptualization helps to better itemize and differentiate the various ways of perceiving equality in the context of ECEC. Thus, we will provide more useful analytical tools for examining the various meanings of equality. In what



follows, we will further explicate this by examining Westen's (1985), Lazenby's (2016) and Fraser's (1997, 2008) conceptualizations related to equality.

Westen (1985) has suggested that the concept of equality should be seen as being composed of four distinct elements:

- (1) A distributive pattern, namely, equality
- (2) A description of the subjects between whom the pattern is to hold, such as all members of a particular district or all citizens of a state
- (3) A distributive object around which the pattern is focused, such as jobs, resources or welfare
- (4) An account of the obstacle(s) to achieving the object that ought to be absent or equalized as an obstacle(s), such as [oppressive power relations related to] wealth, physical strength or skin colour.

The sections in brackets [] have been added by the authors for contextual accuracy.

Westen's analysis concerning the components of the conceptualization of equality acknowledges its relation to diversity more explicitly than Husén's conceptualization, since it suggests also taking into account the obstacles to achieving the object. Therefore, this view acknowledges the potential existence of hierarchies and power relations that relate to some kind of conceptualizations of 'difference'.

This notion concerning the relation of the terms 'inequality' and 'difference' leads to a discussion of social justice (e.g. Fraser, 1997, 2008; Nussbaum, 2003). In short, social justice addresses the question of how to achieve equality in a society where differences and oppressive power relations exist. Consequently, Lazenby (2016) argues that the conception of equality should be examined, in addition to the elements proposed by Westen (1985), from the perspective of scope. This refers to conceptions of who the main actor is in influencing equality in education. Lazenby (2016) states that conceptions of equality with an institutional scope include a consideration of the state and the public institutions of society, including the educational institutions. These conceptions determine how institutions and their governance ought to be structured. Conceptions of equality with an interpersonal scope concern the responsibilities of individuals. Interpersonal conceptions of equality guide our actions in relation to other people in the world.

Since accounts usually suggest or deliberate 'how to' questions in policy debates, 'how to' question is relevant to our aim as well. Fraser (1997) suggests that the remedies, for injustice, depending on the distributive object, are (economic) redistribution, (cultural) recognition and (political) representation. Redistribution seeks to create a more just distribution of resources amongst individuals or groups of people.

The concept of recognition aims to challenge the requirement to assimilate to the dominant cultural norms and instead recognizes the distinctive perspectives of different, sometimes oppressed, minority groups. The third remedy, representation, aims to point out that the ability to influence public debate and decision-making is crucial for equality to exist (Fraser, 2008).

Furthermore, Fraser (1997) divides the remedies for injustice into affirmation and transformation. Affirmative remedies aim to correct unequal outcomes without destabilizing the status quo by disturbing the framework that generates them. Affirmative redistribution is the reallocation of resources to different groups of people whose differentiation is not questioned but rather taken for granted. Transformative remedies attempt to intervene in response to unequal outcomes by restructuring the framework that generates the outcome. This could be, for example, intervention into the production of group differentiation (Fraser, 1997). Recognition in its affirmative form means reevaluating the identities of oppressed groups, such as women, non-heterosexuals, working-class people, people of non-binary gender, people of colour and people with disabilities. In contrast, transformation means a fundamental deconstruction of these cultural categories (Fraser, 1997).

## The inquiry

We will illustrate how the above-mentioned way of conceptualizing equality helps unravel the meanings of equality by using the qualitative interviews of 31 municipal politicians (19 women and 12 men), who were members of the governing bodies, such as municipal boards of education, that were responsible for ECEC decision-making in 10 municipalities. The interviewees represented six different political parties encompassing all of the major Finnish parties from left to right. As is common in a qualitative inquiry, the interviewees do not comprise a representative sample of Finnish ECEC policymakers. Instead, the selection aims at contextual variations. The interviewees come from 10 municipalities that were invited to collaborate with the research team. The municipalities that participated in this study vary in their geographical location, demographics and aspects related to their economic status. Four of the municipalities are, in the Finnish context, considered large cities with populations ranging from 100,000 to 650,000 inhabitants. Two of the municipalities are, from a Finnish perspective, mid-sized towns with populations varying between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. The last four municipalities each have fewer than 20,000 inhabitants. The four largest, densely populated cities have experienced a positive net

migration, which is based on the good availability of work and study opportunities. Two mid-sized municipalities have faced economic difficulties in recent years due to changes in the economic structure. Due to a decrease in work opportunities, both of these towns have experienced a negative net migration. Two of the smallest municipalities are sparsely populated rural municipalities.

The 10 municipalities have organized their ECEC in differing ways. For example, there are differences in the share of public and private ECEC provisions, in terms of the local benefits provided for parents to use for private ECEC services and care for children at home and in the provisions of ECEC for children with a parent at home due to unemployment or retirement, for instance. The participating municipalities illustrate the variations that can typically be found among Finnish municipalities.

The interviews were conducted in 2016 by a team of nine researchers. The interviewees gave their informed consent to participate in the study. In the interviews, topics such as municipal ECEC, childcare allowances, the privatization of ECEC and the decision-making process in the municipal ECEC were discussed. The interviews, which average 90 min in length, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The language used in the interviews was Finnish, and thus, the presented quotations have been translated into English with the intention of capturing the meanings and senses described rather than exact word-for-word translations (see Nikander, 2008).

In this inquiry, our analytical framework is informed by discourse studies. In terms of our empirical data, we interpreted the interviews as produced through the interaction of the interviewee and the interviewer at a certain time and in a specific place. Thus, the analytical focus is on the conceptualizations of equality rather than the factual information about ECEC provisions. We commenced our analysis by reading through the interviews and selecting for further analysis all of the excerpts in which equality, equity, inequality, social justice or injustice were implied or referred to directly. Next, the selected excerpts were categorized according to the following viewpoints based on the ideas of Westen (1985), Lazenby (2016) and Fraser (1997, 2008)).

- (1) Subject of equality: Between whom is equality aimed to be achieved?
- (2) Object of equality: What are the distributive objects around which the conception of equality is focused?
- (3) Remedies for equality (affirmative or transformative): Who are the main actors influencing equality in ECEC?

Each combination of different responses to the first two questions was first examined as a separate discourse. Every discourse was then further assessed

using question 3. Then, based on the examination of the similarities and differences of these discourses, they were categorized into three groups: conceptualizations of equality focusing on the present, conceptualizations of equality focusing on the future and multidimensional conceptualizations of equality. In the following sections, these approaches to equality are presented more thoroughly.

### Conceptualizations of equality focusing on the present

In the data under examination, one way of conceptualizing equality was to see it as the equal distribution of objects at the present time. There were three discourses holding this kind of view of equality. In these discourses, the presupposition seemed to be that the subjects of equality, mainly parents, had similar kinds of abilities to utilize given resources – for example, to make informed decisions that would best serve the needs of the family and children – and thus presupposed the idea of equality as a beginning (Husén, 1975). We will illuminate this further via three discourses that differ in terms of their focus on the subjects and objects of equality.

#### Equality as an equal opportunity to choose

In the interviews, the opportunity to choose was constructed as one of the objects of equality. Within the discourse on this object of equality, it was viewed as important that parents have similar kinds of opportunities to select home care, public ECEC services or a private ECEC provider. It was considered a public responsibility to make sure that these opportunities to make individual decisions concerning day care and early education were made possible via public funding. The following excerpt illustrates this discourse:

Interviewer: Well what about this municipality's supplement for the home care allowance? There are maybe kind of two extremes in the public debate. The first is that children have a right to be cared for at home and another is that it might become a poverty trap for parents, mostly mothers, who are taking care of their children at home. How do you feel about that?

Policymaker: Well, I think it is, it might be this kind of poverty trap, since the allowance is not.. It is too.. It [the allowance] should be decent so that the opportunity is equal for every family. It needs to be sufficient.

In the excerpt, the interviewee positions the opportunity to make a choice about whether to take

care of children at home as an object of equality in lines 7–8. Repetitive talk in the response, as seen in line 7, suggests a hesitance to take an explicit stance concerning the amount of the home care allowance. In this discourse, the municipality should provide sufficient financial support so that individuals can make choices concerning child care, which is, viewed as an individual and private decision.

In the following excerpt, where the interviewee talks about restrictions in entitlement to ECEC, the object of equality is the freedom to choose child care services regardless of the parents' labour market status. The interviewee states that means testing for access to full-time ECEC might be an obstacle to achieving this kind of equality.

**Policymaker:** It is about the equality of families. We cannot know.. What is said in the files does not inform us about the situation of the family. It can be good for all that if you are unemployed you have the opportunity to take a job right away, or if you have a temporary job, you need to have an opportunity to have at least a part-time day care place. Of course, we also have quite good club activities organized by the church, so I don't know how many parents we have who are staying at home and whose children attend early childhood education. In our party, we simply think that it is equality that everyone has the right to participate without needing to explain their physical and mental health history or something else. There might be something in the background.

The interviewee's political party supports unconditional entitlement to ECEC. The interviewee argues that we cannot know whether the family would benefit from ECEC by solely looking at the parents' labour market status. The interviewee highlights that she considers it important that parents can make a decision concerning the use of ECEC services without needing to explain the reasons for their decision. Thus, the object of equality seems again to be freedom of choice. Nevertheless, she suggests that part-time ECEC might be sufficient, and she mentions that there is also open ECEC organized by non-profit organizations. Thus, the scope is not solely institutional (Lazenby, 2016).

### **Equality as access to services that (average) parents choose**

The other side of the coin of this discourse concerns access to services as an object of equality. Within this discourse, equality of access is considered as the

adequate supply of services that the average family would like to use. As the following excerpt illustrates, within this view, the policymaker considers equality as something between children with different socio-economic backgrounds. In other words, the subjects of equality here are the children themselves.

**Policymaker:** Well, if we think really, for children.. for small and a bit older, and also for young school children, this city is a small big city. I mean that all of these services for families of small children – early childhood education, health services such as maternity clinics, dentists, all possible day care centres, both public and private – are accessible. This is one thing. And I need to mention, really, that our services, such as hockey clubs, scouts, musical play schools and other services... it is acknowledged here that money doesn't grow on trees, so they are affordable for large numbers of families. It makes it more equal for the children. If we think about those very small children, if their families want to, they can attend infant swimming since it is accessible. It is not that there are just a few who can afford it. I think it is about equality.

In this excerpt, equality is seen as something that needs to be achieved sufficiently, not totally: the interviewee states that the services are affordable for large numbers of families and that this makes it 'more equal'. Thus, this discourse suggests that it is acceptable that not all children access these services. In this discourse, the object of equality is access to the services parents want their child to attend; therefore, equality is not a starting point, nor a treatment (Husén, 1975). As we can see in line 8, where the interviewee states that services are affordable for 'large numbers of families', this discourse accepts the idea that some children may be out. Thus, equality is rather constructed as a final goal of having *equal (enough) opportunities to experiences considered importanta by parents*.

This discourse suggests the reallocation of resources via a (partly) subsidized public-sector and third-sector services. It seems that equality is something that encompasses children of the middle class, but not necessary those children whose parents are, for some reason or other, incapable of utilizing these services. By referring to the fact that it is acknowledged in general by both private and public institutions that 'money does not grow on trees' as mentioned in line 7, it seems that the responsibility for addressing questions of inequality is divided between the market, third sector and public services. The need for remedies is not considered in this discourse.

### **Equality as an equal fee for everyone**

Within the conceptualizations of equality focusing on the present, financial issues were dealt with from the point of view related to the child care fees:

Interviewer: When you said that you think that it belongs to everyone, did you mean that there are some kinds of questions of equality or equity involved?

Policymaker: I think that it is the same as health clinics. It should cost the same for everyone regardless of income, like child benefits and so on.

In this excerpt, the interviewee states that the child care fee should be the same regardless of the family's income, as seen in lines 3–4. Currently in Finland, the fee is dependent of the family's income and size. The maximum fee for public day care in 2017 was 290 euros/month. According to the OECD (2007), Finnish two-earner families spend approximately 7% of their income on child care as compared to the OECD average of 17%.

The subjects of this concept equality concerns are families that have made similar choices concerning child care, namely, families that have selected to receive ECEC in a preschool. In this view, the object equality concern is the fee. The interviewee juxtaposes the child care fee with the costs of health care clinics and child benefits paid by the state, which are the same for everyone. Thus, this discourse suggests that the fee should be subsidized and affordable, that is, equally inexpensive for everyone. This discourse is not related to accessibility. The fees are not constructed here as a matter of affordability, but rather, according to this view, equality entails that the cost is distributed equally.

In sum, these conceptualizations of equality were flat, meaning that within these discourses, the subjects of equality did not seem to have histories or larger life contexts that would require levelling the playing field. Drawing on Westen's (1985) analytics of equality, we can argue that this discourse of equality, which views equality both as the starting point and, at least some extent, the final goal, is present when talking about equality among the parents. The core object of equality is the opportunity to choose. Using the conceptualization of Fraser (2008), no remedies to fight the existing injustices are needed according to this discourse.

### **Conceptualization of equality focusing on the future**

The second way of conceptualizing equality was to perceive it from the perspective of the future, that is

to say, from the perspective of external results (Subrahmanian, 2005). As in the present-oriented use of the concept of equality examined above, these discourses also presupposed that the subjects of equality had similar kinds of abilities to utilize the available resources or that the differing abilities were not considered to have anything to do with questions of equality. We will illuminate these discourses further via two separate objects of equality that were evident in the interviews: the future income of the parents and the children's future opportunities.

### **Equality concerning the parents' future income**

When talking about external results (Subrahmanian, 2005) from the point of view of the parents, gender equality was mentioned. This is exemplified in the following excerpt in which a policymaker responds to a question about the issue of equality in the context of ECEC:

Policymaker: I don't know, I think that it [ECEC] has made it possible for women to participate in working life equally with men. We have day care places available. They are high quality, affordable and nearby. It might be misleading to speak about restricting the unconditional right because it is no longer unconditional. But anyway, if we continue making these restrictions, the influence will eventually be that women will.. Since in Finland women have lower salaries in general, even if they have more education. Women will stay at home to take care of children because we don't have the right to day care. This might be the result. These [recent] decisions do not yet lead to this, but if we enact all of them and raise the fees, there will be families who will think that it will be more beneficial for them to take care of their children at home. And of course, it will influence all of their futures. They do not gain work experience and progress in their careers. It influences their pensions as well. It might be so that.. It is so that the development of equality is reversed.

This excerpt illustrates accounts in which equality among parents is examined from the point of view of external results. Drawing on Westen's (1985) analytics of the components of equality, we can see that in these accounts, the object of equality is related to finances, such as, salaries and pensions (lines 7 and 13). The subjects of equality are parents of different genders (lines 6 and 7). In these excerpts, responsibility for



addressing the question of inequality is directed to the state and policymakers. Following the definition by Fraser (1997), it can be concluded that within this discourse, redistribution via subsidized ECEC services is seen as a potential remedy for inequalities among parents. In this regard, the remedy is affirmative since it does not suggest destabilizing the cultural norm of mothers being parents who need to choose between being part of the labour force and staying at home. Rather, it aims to correct unequal outcomes without destabilizing the status quo by disturbing the framework that generates them.

### **Equality concerning the children's future**

Within the discourses of equality that are concentrated on the future, there were examples where children were posited as the subjects of equality. In these accounts, equality of access to ECEC was the topic that was discussed most often.

In these accounts, access to ECEC is considered a remedy to overcome unequal backgrounds or starting points and it is seen to equalize the differences caused by poor parenting. In the next excerpt, the interviewee answers the question of whether issues related to equality have been discussed by policymakers recently. The excerpt, in which the interviewee contemplates the accessibility and targeting of ECEC services from the point of view of immigrants and native Finns, exemplifies this kind of conceptualization:

**Policymaker:** We can't know what is happening in their homes. These kinds of basic everyday activities may not be going well [in some families]. The lack of basic security of children already before school age may have a long-lasting impact. So this saving may turn into a large expense. I consider these [ECEC services] as part of social services. We should hold on to these social services – also for native Finns – and we should maintain their quality just to maintain the stability of society.

In this excerpt, the policymaker is addressing a question concerning restrictions on an access to full-time ECEC. When asked about equality in relation to ECEC services, the policymaker refers to basic security that some children might lack (lines 2–3). This statement concerning the long-term consequences can be interpreted from the perspective of equality in terms of external results. It refers to the gains achievable by ensuring a secure environment for children to develop (Subrahmanian, 2005).

In the second part of the excerpt, the policymaker notes the difference between native Finns and others: equality is something that is created between these

groups in order to maintain peaceful relations in society (lines 5–7). Within this discourse, equality is not only important in itself; it also has instrumental value. In the example, it is considered a means to maintain social cohesion. Segregation between ethnic groups is taken for granted, and this discourse does not propose a change in terms of this categorization. Thus, this discourse has affirmative elements since it suggests that some children do not have secure environments to grow up in and it is a societal duty to even out these differences. Equal, publicly supported access to ECEC is constructed as a remedy to injustice.

In conclusion, within this discourse, the conceptualization of equality is related to external results – to the future. Equality has instrumental value. Drawing on the work of Fraser (2008), the remedies for injustice are affirmative rather than transformative. Unravelling the mechanisms that influence the parents and cause them to be unable to offer basic security, at least as it is typically seen and defined, is viewed as an essential task.

### **Multidimensional equality: only for children in ECEC?**

The third way of conceptualizing equality takes into account the future and the cultural context more widely in addition to a consideration of the present. Due to this, the remedies examined within this discourse differ from the ones presented earlier.

The next excerpt illustrates this discourse and deals with the inequalities that exist among children. It is acknowledged that access to ECEC does not provide a sufficient solution to the inequalities that presently exist among children. Within this discourse, the subjects of equality are the children of different socio-economic backgrounds. In the example, they are perceived as living in different parts of the municipality:

**Policymaker:** In municipality D, it is great that all the political parties have understood that good services for families with small children are something we can be proud of. They are our flagship and competitive edge since we also want to be attractive when families with small children make decisions concerning where to live. It is a huge thing that ECEC services and other services for families with small children have a good reputation. However, we do have these major problems in this city. Marginalization of children is a yardstick and that is something in which we are failing. There are different realities among children in different parts of

the municipality. This is something that has been very important to me personally and I have fought it. We have put considerably more money into the areas where children have fewer opportunities. We set up more cultural services, we even recruit artists for kindergartens, since we know that in certain areas children do not have artistic and cultural hobbies. If we examine certain areas in the downtown area, every child has an artistic or cultural hobby. If we go to another area, the difference is shocking. Then the municipality needs to intervene and provide. We just give more money to these kindergartens, and then, there are those artists providing cultural and musical experiences, experiences of succeeding for these children and everything. I think that art and culture play a huge role in how a child constructs reality.

In this excerpt, the object of equality is an opportunity to engage in cultural experiences and the scope is institutional. It is explicitly stated that the municipality needs to intervene (line 15) and to provide cultural experiences for those children who would not have access to them otherwise. It is assumed that this is done by providing additional resources via preschools in certain areas. Thus, the remedy is affirmative.

There was also one example in the data in which the remedy suggested could be considered transformative:

**Policymaker:** I hope that in the future, we will progress towards a culture that is more sensitive to individuals for the sake of the equality of children. We should avoid strict and stereotypical norms and categories concerning the child's character. For example, certain gender roles – how should I say – that we do not plant these paradigms into them. I would let them figure it out by themselves when they grow up. 'Gender neutral' is a dangerous term here when we are talking about child care. It is ideological and controversial. However, the kind of idea that boys should wear blue is not present-day thinking. This should be considered in early childhood education. Of course, this is considered in many places, but, for example, in maternity clinics, you can realize that it is not mainstream yet

In the excerpt, the policymaker constructs individuality as the object of equality as seen in line 2. Subjects of equality are the individual child, who each has differing and unique interests and personality traits. The need for the deconstruction of gender norms is highlighted also particularly in lines 2–8. Thus, the remedy for inequality is constructed as being transformative (Fraser, 2008). The policymaker positions gender norms as being old-fashioned (line 8) to underline her overline message.

In sum, within this discourse, the object of equality is both the children's experiences in the present and in the future. In this discourse, both affirmative and transformative remedies are necessary. However, this discourse entails only children within the institution; it does not include those who are not participating in ECEC nor the parents of those children.

## Discussion

In English, the concept of equality is said to mean an approach to fairness that emphasizes the need to treat a certain group of people (or all people) the same regardless of their status or level of power (see Espinoza, 2007). This viewpoint holds that fairness is most likely to be achieved when those background inequalities are put aside or neutralized in debate and decision-making processes. By contrast, equity means taking into account the advantages and disadvantages that have shaped the participants' experiences, which may result in a requirement to treat participants differently in order to create conditions that help achieve fair outcomes. Equity emphasizes the redistribution of power and resources (Espinoza, 2007). Criticism has been posed arguing that 'equity' and 'equality' are, however, frequently used as if they were interchangeable terms (Espinoza, 2007). However, categorization between equity and equality is not evident in every language. For example, the Finnish language does not differentiate between these concepts as clearly. Literature suggesting greater awareness of the quite dichotomous differentiation of these concepts presupposes that the concepts have, or should possess fixed meanings. Moreover, the literature does not provide tools for understanding the multifaceted, fluctuating meanings these concepts might entail and fails to notice the ways in which the varying meanings of concepts are used in rhetorical battles. As evidenced by this paper, it is clear that more nuanced tools for unravelling the concept of equality would be useful for accurately perceiving the different ways in which the concept is used depending on the subject of equality and the context in which the subject is located.

In this paper, we investigated the ways in which inequality are conceptualized in discussions of ECEC by

Finnish policymakers. The conceptualizations differed depending on the subjects of equality. In the data scrutinized in this study, the conceptualizations differed depending on whether the subjects of equality were adults, children at the border of an institutional setting or children within the ECEC institution. Our way of combining earlier suggestions concerning the components of the concept of equality revealed that despite a desire to maintain the status quo, equality as a starting point becomes visible in discourses related to equality among parents and equality among children that do not (yet) attend ECEC services. The aim of societal change and deconstructing categories is somewhat present when discussing equality among children within the institution. It is noteworthy that when examining conceptualizations of equality, the need for remedies is not considered as evident when discussing equality among parents. Economic injustice is recognized at least in some accounts, but cultural or political forms of injustice were not discussed. Thus, the potential disadvantaged position of groups of parents in society was not raised when talking about equality in relation to the ECEC system. Within these discussions, parents were not considered being involved in any oppressive power relations that might influence their opportunities to make informed decisions or utilize the services they want or need. This lack of recognition may lead to a situation where public resources spent on the ECEC system benefit mainly those who are already doing relatively well. There is already some evidence of this; in Finland, the use of ECEC services is more common among middle class families and those having high socio-economic status compared to the parents with lower educational background and low income (Hietamäki et al., 2017). This might mitigate the ECEC system's ability to reduce inequalities among children. Inequality can be seen as problem in its own right, but also as source of other social problems. Numerous body of research literature link poverty with both poor short-term health and well-being and lesser long-term accumulation of human capital, for example (see Meyers, Rosenbaum, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2003).

We do not claim that our data covers the entirety of Finnish equality discourse in the field of ECEC, but we suggest it is worth pondering whether the notions that we have highlighted possess a wider resonance. Our analysis shows, quite alarmingly, that the commitment to equality work seems vague and unfocused. Therefore, instead of celebrating equality in the Nordic countries, we need to continue conducting critical analyses of how equality and social justice are understood in different contexts. Together with Westen's (1985) and Lazenby's (2016) analytics, Fraser's (1997) conceptualization of affirmative and transformative remedies provide useful tools for unravelling the Finnish case of conceptualizations of

equality. Both the analysis and the prevention of the potentially harmful effects of the unanalytical use of the concept of equality remain work for the future.

## Notes

1. See [http://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa.html#tab1485503695201\\_4](http://www.stat.fi/tup/maahanmuutto/maahanmuuttajat-vaestossa.html#tab1485503695201_4).
2. By preschool, we refer to integrated early childhood education services for 0–6-year-olds. Children begin to attend pre-primary education the year that they turn six.

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